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Introduction – Performance and Political Economy: Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being

by Katerina Paramana | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024), Political Economy and the Arts

ABSTRACT In this article, Katerina Paramana introduces *Lateral*'s special section, "Political Economy and the Arts," and its first set of articles, "Performance and Political Economy: Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being," and provides the rationale and context for this section's topic. In the face of a multiplicity of world-wide problems and suffering, this special section aims at a reinvestment in desire for change in order to resuscitate and reinvest in hope. The articles therein provide insights into the current relationship between politics, human and non-human bodies, and their well-being (and why it is necessary we take action to change it) which might help us steer the wheel before we drive off the cliff.

KEYWORDS bodies, performance, political economy, politics, well-being

Lateral's special section "Political Economy and the Arts" seeks to address how art and political economy might impact, critique, and reflect on one another and their futurity through the staging of conversations across the fields of visual and performing arts, cultural studies, visual cultures, politics, economics, human geography, social theory, and health and well-being. It invites the submission of articles, manifestos, provocations, interviews, dialogical exchanges, and artist contributions that aim to, for example:[1]

- Examine labor, work, productivity, or the growth economic paradigm and their relation to bodies/well-being/artistic practices.

- Analyze artworks that have made impactful statements about the political economy in which they are embedded and/or offered important insights about reimagining the role of political economy.
- Comparatively examine artworks within different political economies.
- Trace how politico-economic contexts affect artworks or artistic practices.
- Reveal racial capitalism's impact on artistic practices.
- Enter into dialogue with existing publications on art/performance and politics to offer a point of view from a marginalized perspective.
- Offer a textual or audio-visual provocation that invites or necessitates a response from a different disciplinary perspective or from another author.

Although subsequent contributions to the section will be developed from open calls, dialogical exchanges, and provocations, this first iteration of the section emerged from the events of the research seminar series "Performance and Political Economy: Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being in the 21st Century,"[2] which I curated in 2023–2024 as part of my work leading the activities of the Performance, Cultures and Politics Research Group at Brunel University of London.[3] It includes contributions from the events' speakers as well as from others who were invited to enter into dialogue with the research seminar series' three events: "Political Economy and Contemporary Performance Practices," "Bodies and Racial Capitalism," and "The Growth Economic Paradigm, Human and Non-Human Bodies, and Well-Being." In keeping with the focus of the series and of this journal section, the pieces in this current issue examine the relationship between bodies, politics, and well-being by bringing together perspectives from researchers and practitioners from the arts, political economy, and health and well-being. Most of the articles here are developments of the presentations by the speakers at the series' events, following the dialogical exchanges that took place there, while some are new contributions on the topic. In what follows, I offer the rationale for and some context on the topic and introduce the article contributions to it.

It is important to note that bringing together different disciplinary perspectives presupposes and necessitates a variety of approaches to and expanded

understandings of what constitutes performance, well-being, and politics. For example, articles in this issue approach performance as the performance of self, the movement of bodies across borders, or the artform itself, and well-being—both physical and psychological—as being detrimentally affected by factors such as the function of capitalism, ecological devastation, forced migration, and displacement. What the terms performance, bodies, and well-being intend to encompass and the ways they perform is highlighted in the summary of each article in the last section of this introduction. Such different methodological approaches and inter- and trans-disciplinary understandings are embraced by the Political Economy and the Arts special section in general and in this issue; experimentation and exploration of the gaps between disciplines and methodologies are part of its ethos.

Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being

The mechanisms and effects of neoliberal capitalism have been widely discussed.[4] Wendy Brown, for example, building on Foucault's thinking, argues that in neoliberal capitalism all spheres of life are treated as markets and are therefore "economized."[5] David Harvey emphasizes neoliberalism's effects on both the role of the state and of the individual: The state is expected to create and maintain an institutional framework that serves neoliberal practices even though these work against the welfare of the collective of individuals, and the individual is expected to best advance their well-being by freeing individual entrepreneurial skills and freedoms.[6]

However, for Marx, it is capitalism in general that is antithetical to well-being. Marx's conception of ethics as they relate to capitalism and his views on capitalism's effects on human well-being underlie all of his work but are most evident in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* through his perspective on human nature and account of alienation.[7] Capitalism, for Marx, prevents

humans from living life in a manner consistent with their human nature—it alienates them from their human nature because the abstract relations to wage labour in capitalism make labour an "activity of alienation"—and consequently capitalism inhibits well-being, preventing humans from flourishing.[8] He argues that capitalist "[p]roduction does not simply produce man [*sic*] as a commodity, the human commodity, man [*sic*] in the role of commodity" but it, crucially, "produces him [*sic*] in keeping with this role as a mentally and physically dehumanized being."[9]

Current wide-spread issues of inequality, inequity, precarity, a crisis of well-being, exploitation of vulnerable populations, and environmental catastrophe are by-products of capitalism.[10] Achille Mbembe refers to the world we live in as a necropolitical world which creates "death-worlds:" "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead."[11]

It's All Doom and Gloom

Capitalism has not only resulted in a crisis of different kinds of well-being, but also colonized the concept to profit from it, as we see from the growing well-being industry.[12] Workplace efforts to ensure workers are happy through the provision of well-being offerings not only ignore that it is the work demands that produce the ill-being they are trying to address, but also that they actively maintain a politico-economic system that produces it.[13] It is for such reasons that many argue that mental health problems are most constructively examined as problems of communities or societies.[14]

Franco Bifo Berardi, in his book *Quit Everything*, discusses the effects of the current state of the world on people's mental health, including the resultant wave of depression amongst young people. He suggests that depression has in turn

resulted in the abandonment of hope, but perhaps the condition is not depression as we understand it, but instead "desertion": a withdrawal—conscious or subconscious—of psychological energy and a "disinvestment of desire" in the face of the multiplicity of world-wide problems and suffering, all of which feel unmanageable and unsolvable.[15]

In "Brutalism, Suprematism and Nazi-Libertarianism," and in anticipation of the May 20, 2024 summit of Western right-wing leaders, Berardi suggests that we are, in fact, doomed.[16] He argues that the ultra-reactionary wave we are dealing with is the result of a hyper-liberalism which has instituted competition as the inter-human relations' universal principle. This phenomenon, he argues, cannot simply be explained in political terms, for political interpretation fails to explain the anthropological mutation that is at the core and responsible for "a mass adhesion to ultra-reactionary movements." The explanation he offers is that, whereas historical Nazi-fascism supported state intervention in the economy, the supremacist wave instead combines cultural conservatism and racism with a "hysterical emphasis on economic liberalism." What this supremacist wave is promoting is "brutality and the freedom to be brutal." Berardi proposes that an inversion of ethical judgement has arisen; one that suggests a perversion of psychic processing and perception "even before a moral one: gore capitalism, as Sayak Valencia defined the Mexican reality."[17] He attributes this perversion to three main factors: capitalism's promotion of competition, which has worn away the foundations of solidarity, "ridiculed empathy" for others' suffering, and consequently destroyed social civilization; our decreased ability to decipher the truth or falsity of statements due to our overexposure to information technology; and the immoral and racist attitudes towards the waves of migration from what he figures as the Global South towards the Global North, which reaped the benefits of colonial exploitation of the Global South and has thus far suffered less from climate change. His conclusions are grim. He believes that what fuels the growth of libertarian brutalism is an energy that appears to emerge from the human race's cognitive and technological evolution, and that this energy can only be

stopped, not by political will, but by an opposing and similarly potent energy. He fears, however, that the energy fueling libertarian brutalism will only stop when "it has produced all the effects of which it is capable:" full destruction.[18]

Reinvestment in Hope

As an antidote to Berardi's fears, I would like to, and suggest that we need to, reinvest in desire for change in order to resuscitate and reinvest in hope. This requires an approach to and treatment of politico-economic models as what they are, that is, as experiments that can be ended and replaced by others, and a commitment to imagining alternative politico-economic models.[19] William Davies suggests that it is about writing "economic science fictions"—for capitalist institutions are also founded on fictional expectations and "collectively endorsed fictions" such as the value of money—insisting that it is possible for imagination to intrude into economic life in a manner that is uninvited but also unaccountable and incomputable.[20] If we can write them, and our new fictions are based on an ethical framework founded itself on an understanding that we are bound to one another (to both human and non-human others) by an inescapable and always present sociality,[21] and, therefore, the "life of the other…is also our life,"[22] we might be able to build something that prevents the suffering of others.[23] In fact, we are ethically obliged to build a political economy that establishes politico-economic equality and minimizes precarity, despite the task's difficulty, for:

> We can be alive or dead to the sufferings of others—they can be dead or alive to us. But it is only when we understand that what happens there also happens here, and that "here" is already an elsewhere, and necessarily so, that we stand a chance of grasping the difficult and shifting global connections in ways that let us know the transport and the constraint of what we might still call ethics.[24]

Aiming at a reinvestment in desire and hope, the articles here, in their engagement with the terms performance, politics, and well-being, use methodological approaches and disciplinary understandings from performance studies, political economy, and psychology. They provide insights into the current relationship between politics, human and non-human bodies, and their well-being (and why it is necessary we take action to change that relationship) which might help us steer the wheel before we drive off the cliff.

In "The Problems with the Critique of Political Economy in the Arts," < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/problems-critique-political-economy-arts-you/> Mi You considers existing artistic and theoretical approaches to political economy to be limited to institutional critique or insufficiently historicized, and critiques the arts' dependence on and therefore complicity with globalization. Engaging with a broader definition of the arts that includes both performing and visual arts, she urges a reconsideration of the relationship between political economy and the arts which accounts for the specificities of the current shift into the era of post-globalization. You proposes that a systemic approach is necessary in the arts in order to attend to the complexities and potentials of a "multi-aligned" world and the consequent emergence of institutional models that are based on non-hegemonic positions. Beyond undertaking advocacy work through artistic interventions, she suggests art can contribute to a new political economy by, for example, (re)defining what "binds together a common humanity at all political levels"—and therefore what kind of political economy can ensure humanity's well-being—and participating in the design of both speculative scenarios about the future at the governmental level and of speculative and critical proposals on policy and geopolitics. These speculations can aid the consideration of challenging questions about a multipolar world.

In "Racial Capitalism, Refugee Adjudication, and the Performances of Zama Zama," < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/racial-

capitalism-refugee-adjudication-performances-zama-zama-metzger/> performance is understood as the movement of bodies across borders as the result of forced migration, which hinders any conception of well-being. Sean Metzger discusses how racial capitalism affects bodies and their movement by investigating the intersection of refugee law and racial capitalism and the ways this intersection makes visible "the performance of human migration under duress." He begins by comparing legal instruments in South Africa and the US, and the ways they structure and restrict refugee movement even in what are considered democratic countries. Cedric Robinson's notion of "racial capitalism" and Jodi Melamed's perspectives on it[25] enable an insightful discussion on racial capitalism, the juridical, and zama zamas—refugees working illegally in mining in South Africa. Metzger's account of the refugees, whose precarious and vulnerable circumstances as the results of racial capitalism pushed them to become zama zamas, illuminates the violences inflicted upon bodies by legal systems and corporations. The article makes visible how racial capitalism is predicated on inequality, racism, and disposability and, therefore—while acknowledging that race's function as a "structuring force on a global scale" precedes capitalism—the importance of both alternative critical frameworks and politico-economic models. Crucially, this analysis on refugee law through performance studies demonstrates the impact of material circumstances and juridical systems on the production of refugees, the relation of refugee production to racial capitalism, and refugees' performances of personhood and legibility in these precarious, vulnerable, and oppressive circumstances which are detrimental to their well-being.

In "'A Currency of Happenstance,'" < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/a-currency-of-happenstance-owen/> Louise Owen examines performance and political economy through her close reading of Ryan Gander's participatory art project *The Find* (2023), which engages the audience in chance and decision-making procedures to gather non-monetary coins hidden in public spaces. Owen discusses the work's function in relation to the cost-of-

living crisis and its negative effects on well-being, and the ensuing problematic discourses of self-help to deal with it, since adjusting individual spending patterns cannot address the effects of years of austerity. She argues that the work also raises questions of the modern monetary system and points to the ways coins are both presented as an object of exchange that is circulated and accumulated, and represent a value system which prioritizes attention to money. Owen argues that the construction of *The Find* questions the value placed on money and instead proposes that what is important is the value we place on and therefore the prioritization of relationships and time we spend with others. Ultimately, Owen argues that the cost-of-living crisis and consequently economic necessity drives a lot of our decision making.

In "Young People's Self-Making in Neoliberal Capitalism: Challenges and Opportunities," < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/young-people-self-making-neoliberal-capitalism-butler-coward/> performance is understood as the performance of self in everyday life and in social media. Stephen Butler and Nathaniel Coward discuss capitalism's impact on young people's production and performance of selfhood, evidencing the effects of market societies on young people's mental health and well-being and their susceptibility to mental health issues. Butler and Coward argue that capitalism's competitive and achievement-oriented environment demands success, social status, and the constant performance of young people in social media, resulting in unrealizable levels of self-curation and self-commodification. These demands not only leave young people feeling as if they are failing to meet these extrinsic desires for identity enhancement and status, but, importantly, prevent them from meeting their intrinsic needs for self-worth, belongingness, and relatedness. Crucially, they suggest that, as empirical data shows, the effects of capitalism's emphasis on individualism, private ownership, and competition on young people's health and well-being is greater on those who have fewer opportunities and reduced access to resources as a result of, for example, their racial, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics. Butler and Coward explain that

qualitative and quantitative research documents that capitalism's demands on young people for self-exploitation (exploitation of their skills and self to achieve social and financial success) have negative effects. Until a better politico-economic system addresses the problem at its core, Butler and Coward suggest that to mitigate young people's rising mental health difficulties, their immediate environment (such as their family), as well as educational, cultural, and mental health systems, need to address the issue by protecting young people from pressures for self-optimization and self-exploitation.

Gareth Dale, in "How Vital is Nature? Animated Bodies and Agency in Contemporary Capitalism," < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/how-vital-is-nature-animated-bodies-agency-contemporary-capitalism-dale/> addresses the relationship between politics and the performance of human, non-human, and non-living bodies within capitalism. In particular, he juxtaposes thinking by Indigenous and new-materialist philosophers to examine the political implications of attributing animating and agential characteristics to non-living bodies. By entering in dialogue with Indigenous cosmologies, through the work *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Potawatomi bryologist Robin Wall Kimmerer, and new materialist thinking, through US philosopher Jane Bennett's thinking, he demonstrates that considering nature as animated is not necessarily aligned with environmental ethics. For Kimmerer, he explains, the animated world consists of the natural world and some cultural artifacts such as songs, but artificial objects belong to the inanimate world. Kimmerer understands the relationship between humans and non-humans as reciprocal and believes that capitalism and colonialism prohibit this reciprocal relationship. This is because, for one, the market economy aims at infinite growth, which the planet cannot sustain, and "grants personhood to corporations but denies it to the more-than-human beings."[26] Bennett on the other hand considers everything animated, including objects such as computers. Dale argues that Bennett's approach is problematic because it de-emphasizes both human moral responsibility in destroying the

environment and agency in dealing with the ecological crisis, while at the same time exonerates capitalism from the social and environmental violence for which it is responsible. Drawing on Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*,[27] Dale suggests that a dialectical and relational understanding of humans' position in the natural world is necessary to both fully appreciate it and realize the extent to which humans' performance in the world has been undermining nature's animacy and ecological devastation has been affecting the well-being of both human and non-human bodies.

The backdrop of Marina Gržinić's "Without Rethinking Colonialism and Racialization, a Sustainable Future is not Possible" < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/without-rethinking-colonialism-racialization-sustainable-future-is-not-possible-grzinic/> is the global necrocapitalist system of neoliberal capitalism and the landscape of profit above all else it has created, while exploiting everything possible and treating vulnerable populations as disposable in the interest of wealth accumulation. Her text therefore considers the performances of necrocapitalism, its relation to racialization, and its effects on the well-being of bodies, especially vulnerable bodies. She argues that examining the connections and differences amongst post-socialism, post-colonialism, and capitalism are crucial to understanding global politics and provides a diagram illustrating both these relations over time across North, South, West, and the former East, as well as the relation between capital, labor, colonialism, and capitalism across these territories. She argues that the reconsideration of the racial/colonial and imperial/colonial divides is crucial to terminating capitalist colonialism. She closes by reflecting on the mass displacement of refugees, particularly from what she calls the Global South, and the current relationship between the EU and the US, which she characterizes as a "new form of hyper-exploitation and devastation," where the dying US imperial power has turned Europe into "a provincial territory and an area for high-level US financing and extractivism."

The issue's section closes with Tara Fatehi's "Conscious Delirium of a Travelling Body." < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/conscious-delirium-traveling-body-poetics-politics-creative-practice-fatehi/> This text explores relations between bodies, politics, displacement, and coloniality, and their effects through a choreography of creative and critical reflections on artworks and historical events in the UK, Iran, and Gaza across different temporalities, including the ongoing settler-colonial occupation of Palestine. Well-being here is implicitly addressed through the effects of colonialism and displacement on individual and collective bodies. The author/artist interweaves discussion on these events, and her personal experiences related to them, with discussion of two of her projects: her artist residency at the UN Office and her work *Mishandled Archives*. Both projects deal in varying ways with politics of erasure and with an interest in intervening in archives: both personal ones, as in the case of *Mishandled Archives*, and colonial ones, as in the case of her UN Residency. The swinging back and forth across events and projects reflects Fatehi's movement as an artist across countries and her experiences navigating identity labels and dealing with displacement and loss.

We hope these contributions shed some light on the necessity of different disciplinary perspectives in approaching and understanding issues relating to bodies, politics, well-being, and their interrelation, and, consequently, in offering some insights into how we might go about imagining a new political economy. I am grateful to the authors for their insights, to the anonymous reviewers for their labor and feedback, and to *Lateral* for providing the space for these conversations.

Notes

1. For inquiries, please email the *Political Economy and the Arts* editor, Katerina Paramana, at katerinaparamana@hotmail.com with "Political Economy and the Arts" in the email subject line. ↩

2. Research Seminar Series, 2023–2024. “Performance and Political Economy: Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being in the 21st Century.” Curated by Katerina Paramana, Brunel University of London, UK. https://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/2022/images/cbass.png < https://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/2022/images/cbass.png> .

3. *Performance, Cultures and Politics Research Group*, Brunel University of London, UK. https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/Groups/Performance-Cultures-and-Politics/Centre-members < https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/Groups/Performance-Cultures-and-Politics/Centre-members> .

4. See, for example: Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Zone Books, 2015); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Katerina Paramana, *Contemporary Performance and Political Economy: Oikonomia as a New Ethico-Political Paradigm* (Routledge, 2025); Katerina Paramana and Anita Gonzalez, eds., *Performance, Dance and Political Economy: Bodies at the End of the World* (Bloomsbury, 2021); and Katerina Paramana, “The Animation of Contemporary Subjectivity in Tino Sehgal’s *Ann Lee*,” *Performance Research* 24, no. 6 (2019): 114–21.

5. Brown, *Undoing the Demos* 2015; and Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 2008.

6. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2.

7. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. M. Milligan (Progress Publishers, 1959), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm < https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm> .

8. David Watson, “A Marxian Approach to Wellbeing: Human Nature and Use Value,” in *A Modern Guide to Wellbeing Research*, eds. Beverley A. Searle, Jessica Pykett, and Maria Jesus Alfaro-Simmonds (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 51–56, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789900163.00012 < https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789900163.00012> .

9. Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 36.

10. Paramana, *Contemporary Performance and Political Economy*.

11. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–12, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11 < https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11> .

12. Watson, “A Marxian Approach to Wellbeing,” 52–53.

13. Watson, “A Marxian Approach to Wellbeing,” 52–54. See also Ronald Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (Repeater Books, 2019).

14. Joanna Moncrieff, “The Political Economy of the Mental Health System: A Marxist Analysis,” *Frontiers in Sociology* 6 (2021): 771875, https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.771875 < https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.771875> .

15. Franco Bifo Berardi, *Quit Everything* (Repeater, 2024).

16. Franco Bifo Berardi, “Brutalism, Suprematism and Nazi-libertarianism,” *Ildisertore*, May 28, 2024, https://francoberardi.substack.com/p/brutalism-suprematism-and-nazi-libertarianism < https://francoberardi.substack.com/p/brutalism-suprematism-and-nazi-libertarianism> .

17. Berardi, “Brutalism, Suprematism and Nazi-libertarianism.”

18. Berardi, “Brutalism, Suprematism and Nazi-libertarianism.”

19. Paramana, *Contemporary Performance and Political Economy*.

20. William Davies, ed., *Economic Science Fictions* (Goldsmiths Press, 2018), 21–22.

21. Katerina Paramana, “Re-turning to the Show: Repetition and the Construction of Spaces of Decision, Affect and Creative Possibility,” *Performance Research* 20, no. 5 (2015): 116–24.

22. Judith Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 140–41, https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.26.2.0134.

23. Paramana, *Contemporary Performance and Political Economy*.

24. Butler, “Precarious Life,” 150.

25. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Jodi Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 77, https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076 < https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076> .

26. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2015), 376.

27. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.

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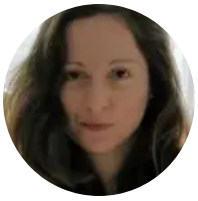

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